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ABSTRACT

Interviews were conducted with 39 junior high school students, whose low attendance records virtually deemed them dropouts, and with 26 parents to determine their perceptions of their school--specifically the building, teachers, course content, methods of instructions, and the school as a whole. Results of these interviews showed that the school and teachers were by and large rated adequate but that some teachers (generally classified as "bad teachers") lacked knowledge of how to deal with students and that course content was often irrelevant and uninteresting. Students expressed a desire for new programs that would help them find jobs and develop a self-identity. Questions on educational and occupational aspirations revealed that graduation from high school and acquisition of semi-professional and professional occupational status was not associated with regular attendance, and that students' occupational aspiration levels were not realistically adjusted to their plans for furthering their education. Students saw lack of needed courses as the greatest obstacle to finishing high school. Data suggests that counselors should spend more time discussing the relevance of school to careers. (KG)

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BLACK URBAN STUDENT'S VIEW OF THEMSELVES AND THEIR COUNSELORS

Mr. Bolden has presented the overall plan for training counselors in the two junior high schools in Philadelphia, and the objectives of that program. Following the summer training sessions, each of the junior high school counseling groups met independently in their own schools to determine how they would proceed to implement the strategies they learned in their training sessions.

The group of counselors in the school in which the present study was conducted decided that there were two main thrusts to which their project should address itself:

1. To determine what problems needed immediate attention, and
2. To determine what direction future counseling activities at the school should take.

To accomplish these goals, the group decided that each counselor should interview students and their parents to determine:

1. Their perception of the school and problems of the school.
2. Their aspirations and expectations, and
3. Their view of the counselor and the counseling process.

They further decided that these interviews should be conducted with those students who seemed most in need of counseling - the "sometime student" or near dropout. These students were labelled "non-attending" throughout this study to avoid any possibility of their being labelled "drop-outs."

Several meetings were held to determine the form and contents of the interview schedule which would be used for interviewing these parents and students. When it had been developed and approved, letters were sent to the parents of all non-attending students in the school. Non-attending

students were defined as those who had attended less than 100 days in the current school year. A list of these students was compiled. The mean number of days attended for this group was 50, but several students had attended less than 30 days in the year, and were to all intents and purposes, drop-outs.

Each member of the counseling staff of six people accepted twenty students and fifteen parents as his personal responsibility for interviewing. Because of difficulties in arranging for the interviews, transportation, and inability to locate parents or students, only 39 of 120 possible student interviews and 26 out of 100 parents interviews were actually accomplished. The data presented in this paper are based on these interviews. The first group of questions in the interview dealt with how parents and students perceived their school, with questions designed specifically to determine feelings about the building, teachers, programs, as well as the school overall. Table 1 shows the reactions of parents and students to these questions.

TABLE 1

Parent and Student Rating of Strawberry Mansion Junior High

		Excellent		Above Avg.		Average		Below Avg.		Inferior	
		P	S	P	S	P	S	P	S	P	S
Building	N	18	13	2	3	5	18	0	4	0	1
	%	69.3	33.3	7.7	7.7	19.2	46.1		10.2		2.6
Teachers	N	12	9	1	9	10	13	1	7	1	1
	%	46.2	23.1	3.8	23.1	38.5	33.3	3.8	17.9	3.8	2.6
Programs	N	12	14	2	10	5	9	1	4	0	1
	%	46.2	35.8	7.7	25.6	19.2	23.1	3.8	10.2		2.6
School over-all*	N	16	8	2	4	6	22	1	4	0	1
	%	61.6	20.5	7.7	10.2	23.1	56.3	3.8	10.2		2.6

*$\chi^2 = 10.39$, $p < .01$, n=64

The difference between student and parent ratings of the school over-all is significant, with the students rating their school as being less desirable than the parents. It is interesting to note, however, that most parent and

student ratings were average or above on all three categories. Less than twenty per cent of these students rated the school, or any of its components listed here, as being less than average, yet they did not attend school consistently.

To determine why these students did not attend regularly, several questions were directed at their feeling about teachers and programs. Table 2 shows how the students view good and bad teachers.

TABLE 2

Traits of Good and Bad Teachers as Perceived by the Students

Good Teacher			Bad Teacher		
	%	N	%	N	
Controls the class	12.8	5	25.6	10	Lacks control
Doesn't pick on you	12.8	5	25.6	10	Pushes you around
Knows your name	0.0	0	5.1	2	Calls you names
Knows subject	10.2	4	10.2	4	Doesn't know subject
Listens to you	17.9	7	7.7	3	Sarcastic
Gives extra help	25.6	10	20.5	8	Doesn't know how to treat people

In general the good teacher was one who listened, who gave extra help, controlled the class and was fair. The bad teacher was one who lacked control, pushed students around, and didn't know how to treat people as people. These characteristics have been used for years to describe good and bad teachers. Both kinds of teachers are found in this school apparently. The implication here for both immediate and long-range plans is obvious; staff development, in which counselors who are specialists in group process should work with teachers to develop those interpersonal skills. This activity will mean a new focus for this counseling staff in terms of more time spent with teachers and less with individual students.

When asked which subjects were most liked and most disliked, the students listed math at the top in both instances, followed by English and reading.

When asked why they liked or disliked the subject, the most frequent reason given for liking the subject was that the content was interesting. The most frequently stated reasons for disliking the subject were dislike of the content and the techniques used to teach the course. The implications of this section of the interview for the counselor seem to be mainly that students who are not attending school regularly may like to do such things as mathematics and English, but that the same classes which are most liked by one student will be most disliked by another. This finding is not new. What is important is that the counselor not assume that the students who are not attending automatically dislike all academic courses. It is much more likely that they will like some and dislike others. The implication is that time must be spent in counseling the student about the relevance of the classes which are problems while at the same time working with teachers to devise new teaching strategies or curricular offerings. Since the counselors in this school have been asked by their principal to work with the total faculty in devising new programs, this kind of information should be useful in their planning.

TABLE 3

Students' Responses to Questions Regarding
Introduction of Special Programs

	Wanted It Students		Did Not Want It Students	
	N	%	N	%
1. More emphasis on things that will help get a job	35	89.6	0	0
2. More time on reading	27	69.1	7	17.9
3. Group discussions of teen-age problems and how to handle them	30	76.8	6	15.4
4. A new course in consumer education	30	76.8	3	7.7
5. New course dealing with community problems	28	71.7	8	20.5
6. Regular studies about Afro-American history	34	87.0	2	5.1
7. More information about jobs	37	94.7	0	0
8. New course in current happenings	26	66.6	6	15.4
9. Part-time job program set up by the schools	21	53.8	3	7.7

Table 3 shows the opinions of the students toward special programs which the counselors had tentatively proposed for introduction to the school. Since the school was totally black, and since many of the problems with which the urban black has to deal have been those involving self-concept and consumer problems, the counselors had assumed that courses in these areas would be perceived by the students as being relevant to their needs. It is apparent that the perception of the counselors was correct since more than half the students indicated that they would like to study each of the areas listed. Items 1 and 7, dealing with jobs were the most often cited as being of special interest. The self-concept, the problem of developing a black identity, was ranked next as seen by the response to the proposed Afro-American courses in history.

This section of the interview showed plainly that the students felt that their school was adequate to provide the kind of education that they needed since most of them felt that it was average or above in all areas listed; that the teachers were by and large adequate, but that some needed to learn more skillful ways of dealing with people and controlling classes; and that new programs should be introduced into the school to deal more adequately with the problems of greatest concern to them. Those concerns had to do with getting jobs and developing a self identity, problems which the counselors had not been primarily concerned with in the past as will be seen when the data from the third section of the interview are presented.

A second section of the interview dealt with aspirations of students and parents. Table 4 shows the educational and occupational aspirations of the students and their educational expectations. It is interesting to note that almost all of these students, most of whom had attended school for less than half time, felt that they would graduate from high school

and go on to some advanced work. This information, the fact that non-attendance

TABLE 4

Student Educational Aspiration Level, Educational Expectation Level, and Occupational Aspiration Level

Educational Aspiration			Educational Expectational		Occupational Aspiration		
	N	Per cent	N	Per cent		N	Per cent
Junior High	1	2.5%	7	17.9%	Skilled	6	15.4%
Senior					White Collar	9	23.0%
. High	20	51.2%	22	56.3%	Service	1	2.6%
Business or Tech-					Professional	8	20.5%
nical					Armed		
School	3	7.7%	3	7.7%	Services	7	17.9%
College	15	38.5%	6	15.3%	Semi-Prof.	4	10.2%
					Unemployed	1	2.6%
					Don't Know	2	5.1%
					Further Schooling needed	26	66.6%

is not associated with graduation from high school, requires some attention from counselors, teachers and administrators. Two lines of reasoning, or more likely, a combination of both, are suggested for further study. One line of reasoning would be that these students have learned that attendance in school is not really a determinant of passing or failing. Several of them have been "passed on" to a higher grade in the past when their attendance rate was just as poor as this year, and they conclude that regular attendance is not really important in determining whether one passes or fails in school. A second line of reasoning would attribute this discrepancy to the fact that these children simply have not associated the fact that failure to attend school regularly will lead to their eventual dropping out of school. Whichever line of reasoning is correct, it is important that some effort on the part of the counselor be devoted to finding why school attendance is seen

as irrelevant to a large number of students.

The third section of this table deals with the occupational aspirations of the students. Unfortunately, the category "Unskilled" was omitted from the list of occupations from which the students could choose, and not all students responded to the questions. Of those who did, the majority indicate the kind of aspirations which have been noted by others who have worked with youth from this kind of environment - they aspire to move into the white collar, semi-professional, or professional occupations. The fact that most of them are only marginally in school, that two-thirds of them realize that additional schooling is needed to obtain this kind of employment, does not affect their aspiration level.

This kind of aspiration level, which creates a cognitive dissonance between the aspiration level and educational expectancy level, must be dealt with by the counselors if satisfactory adjustments to life are to be made. The fact that a significant number of these students do not really expect to go beyond junior high school, and that only nine expect to go beyond high school indicates that some are more realistic than others in this respect. Programs should be developed wherein the counselor works closely with individual teachers as curricula are developed so that the vocational aspects of each curriculum are emphasized and their relevance to later life adjustments clearly explained. Counselors should also be aware of this felt need on the part of students as they deal with the "school problems" that consume so large a part of their counseling time. This focus may require a greater amount of time dealing with teachers rather than students in helping the teacher to make his teaching more relevant to the needs of these students.

When asked what they perceived as being the greatest barriers to further

education, these students indicated that failure to get the subjects which they felt they needed was the most important obstacle. Scheduling plans which include individualizing instruction are only beginning to be introduced into this school. Such flexibility should help to reduce this barrier to the education of these children. Low grades and poor behavior were also cited as being significant reasons for not continuing their education by these children. The problem of grading, which counselors have largely ignored to date, must be addressed. Pass-fail and other plans should be explored, and the de-humanizing effects of constant failure realistically appraised. Fear of gangs was not mentioned by any student as a barrier to further education although this factor is most frequently cited in the press as the reason for poor attendance in this area of Philadelphia. This fear ma be such an accepted fact that it is not questioned or it may be that it is played up by the press out of proportion to its actual effect. In either case it should be explored more fully in future work at the school.

A third section of the interview focused on the counseling program of the school. Table 5 shows the students' perception of the focus of the counseling interviews.

TABLE 5

Focus of Counseling Interviews as Reported by Students

Topic of Discussion	Number of Students Responding		
	N	%	Rank
School work and problems	31	79.4	1
Behavior	25	63.0	2
Friends	18	46.1	3
Getting along with teachers	18	46.1	3
Family problems	14	35.8	4
Career plans	13	33.3	5
Test Results	10	25.6	6
Dating	6	15.4	7

Most of the students, 69% indicated that they had seen their counselor four or five times during the past year, and nearly all (92%) had seen him at least once during the year. Considering the number of absences that most of these students had accumulated, this is a very good record on the part of the counselors.

The distribution of topics under discussion shown in this Table indicates that the counselor had concentrated his efforts largely on school work and school and behavior problems. These two categories of problems may be essentially the same. Unfortunately, no information is available concerning just what the various topics such as Friends or Getting Along with Teachers mean. Further interviews should be conducted to ascertain just what kinds of counsel were given to these students in regards to topics such as the above. Did, for example, the counselor use the counseling session to tell the student that he had to learn to "get along with his teacher" or did he help him see how learning to get along with different kinds of people requires certain kinds of skills? Did the counselor then discuss the problem with the teacher? Did he tell the student that his choice of friends was detrimental to his educational career, or did he help him evaluate the friendships in terms of a symbiotic or parasitic relationship? Considering the limited amount of time available to these harried counselors, it is probable that the former was the case more often than the latter.

This study was begun, as Mr. Bolden indicated, to help develop a new program for this school. The counselors gathered this information to help them look at their role. Their concentration on behaviors, getting along with teachers and friends might indicate that they are perceived as disciplinarians by the students, especially since some parents, as Dr. Swisher will disclose in the next presentation, indicated that their children were afraid to see the counselor. This data indicate that the counselors should concentrate more on

discussing the relevance of school to careers, and emphasizing the occupational possibilities open to these students. Table 5 indicated that they gave relatively little time to this aspect of the child's life. They must help the students' aspirations and expectations, and work more closely with parents as they clarify their role. This aspect of the problem will be discussed by Dr. Swisher.